

Sleepless Nights: Young Adults Navigating Insomnia

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“If I had to describe the feeling of insomnia, it would be like...” he pauses and takes some time to speak. “Like there’s a switch to turn my brain off or on, and no matter how many times I flick the switch, my mind is still racing.”

Like many of his peers, Graeme Martin-Harris, 26, is an insomniac. He tries to go to bed at midnight but ends up tossing and turning all night and not getting any sleep.

“Typically, I’ll wake up around 12 p.m. on a good day,” Martin-Harris says. “I’ll draw a bit and start to work on any projects I must do. I’ll be drawing until I feel like I need a break, and when I do, I’ll play video games for a bit and go back to drawing. By that time, it would be dinner, and I would resume drawing.”

Martin-Harris is now a freelance artist and character designer, someone who creates the image of a character in a movie, video game, or TV show. He supports himself with commissions, people paying him to draw the picture in their heads. He also branches out, making art for YouTubers and merch designs.

"I would try to go to bed early, but I would toss and turn or end up staring at my ceiling." He sighs and looks away. “Over the years, I think the reason why I have trouble sleeping is that my brain will be racing for hours even when I get to bed. I’ll be laying there, and I will suddenly start thinking about something."

According to the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, one in four Americans develop insomnia each year. Around 25% of Americans experience acute insomnia, but 75% of people recover without developing chronic insomnia. Michael Perils,

director of the Behavioral Sleep Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania program, says, “Whether caused by stress, illness, medications, or other factors, poor sleep is very common.”

Insomnia is a disorder in which people have trouble falling or staying asleep. The National Institute of Health says acute, short-term insomnia could potentially be caused by stress or changes in a schedule or environment. Chronic, long-term insomnia occurs three or more nights a week and lasts for more than three months. Many young adults like Martin-Harris experience this frequently.

According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 69.7% of students with low GPAs had difficulty falling asleep, 53.1% of low GPA students experienced leg kicks or twitches at night, 65.6% of students woke up at night and had trouble falling back asleep, and 72.7% had more difficulty concentrating during the day.

Although sleep is essential, it is still overlooked. Despite an increase in insomnia cases, sleep is still not at the forefront of the medical industry, making doctors teach themselves, found Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia in an article Improving Sleep Medicine Education Among Health Professions Trainees for the Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine.

Craig Canapiri is a physician in pediatric pulmonology at Yale-New Haven Hospital and director of the Yale Pediatric Sleep Center. He has written several articles for The New York Times and a book called “It's Never Too Late to Sleep Train: The Low-Stress Way to High-Quality Sleep for Babies, Kids, and Parents.” He helps many families with children's sleep issues, but his knowledge is useful for everyone of all ages.

In an interview with Canapiri, he pauses. “We always joke that if the patient can’t tell us a coherent narrative of what happens every night, that’s probably the problem like the circumstances are chaotic. So, you know, sometimes if there’s not a good way to account for it, that may be the problem. And if they’re talking with their friends, and they’re doing something

different every night. Trying to go to bed at eleven and others that are trying to go to bed at four in the morning, not that crazy for a college student. You can get away with that unless you have insomnia, then you kind of need to build a regimen.”

Gersan Landero, 24, a computer science major at Florida International University, says he has difficulty sleeping almost daily. “When I can’t sleep, I like to find a way to pass the time. I stay up working on homework, and if I can’t concentrate, I’ll play video games or watch video essays on YouTube.”

Landero has been struggling with insomnia since he was 14.

“In high school, I would sleep in class all the time,” says Landero. “I would sleep, and the teachers would never tell me anything because I had the highest grades.” Landero began staying up late into the night, playing “Call of Duty” and talking with his friends on Skype, impacting his sleep cycle. Now a senior in college, most of Landero’s classes are online, which contributes to his chaotic sleep cycle.

Harley Hart, 27, a registered nurse in Columbus, Ohio, had trouble with insomnia for two years before going to a sleep clinic. At the sleep clinic, they kept her for an overnight study where they determined she had narcolepsy. According to The National Institute of Neurological Disorders narcolepsy is a disorder that affects the brain’s capability to control sleep cycles. People with narcolepsy may feel rested after waking up but feel sleepy throughout the day. This can cause them to wake up randomly throughout the night and sleep throughout the day, even during activities like driving. “They did prescribe medications to help keep me awake during the day,” says Harley. “But to also help me get more restful sleep at night because narcolepsy can cause restless sleep.” Since then she finally has a healthy sleep-wake cycle.

The term insomnia is a modern word. Because we had no word for insomnia it was only described. In many ancient texts, the earliest examples of which are from Greek and Roman compositions. The first case of insomnia was found in the work of Aristotle in 350 BC. The first treatment was from a Greek physician in the first century who favored opium to treat insomnia.

The father of medicine, Hippocrates, lived in ancient Greece around 460-370 B.C. He discussed different disorders and medical conditions. He also discussed sleeping disorders and recognized the emotional and physical tolls that come with the lack of sleep. According to Hippocrates, “Both sleep and insomnolence, when immoderate, are bad.”

In Miguel de Cervantes’s 1602 novel “Don Quixote,” he describes sleep as a cure-all medicine: “The food that cures all hunger, the water that quenches all thirst.”

During the Middle Ages, sleeping more than four hours was seen as demonic or as a sin. Theologians in an article about the History of Sleep from the Slumber Center believed that if you fell asleep, you were giving your body to demons to control. One is in a very vulnerable state while asleep, so religious and philosophical figures have a negative view of sleep.

The Renaissance escalated the study of anatomy and the mind. In an article titled “Sleep paralysis in medieval Persia – The Hidayat of Akhawayni” published in the National Library of Medicine, Philip Barrough, Johann Wier, and Isbrand van Diemberbroeck considered sleep paralysis an illness caused by stomach vapors.

According to historian A. Roger Ekrich, in an article for Harper’s Magazine called “Segmented Sleep” the Industrial Revolution changed both work patterns and sleep patterns. Before this period, many individuals across various regions and cultural backgrounds adhered to a biphasic sleep pattern, involving two sleep periods per day. Individuals would retire for the night in the evening, sleep for a few hours, wake up around midnight, engage in activities such as eating and taking care of the children, and then return to sleep for a second sleep phase. In the 1760s, the introduction of gas and later electric lighting also changed sleep. Researchers believe that monophasic sleep, sleeping once per day, became widespread during the industrial

era due to the introduction of artificial lighting. This allowed people to extend their day beyond sunset.

But biphasic sleep is more common than one might think even today. People who take naps throughout the day are known as biphasic sleepers. According to the “Historical overview of REM sleep behavior” by Naoko Tachibana if one sleeps more than twice daily, they will be polyphasic sleepers. Think of a cat. They sleep in short segments throughout the day and are polyphasic sleepers. Babies, typically infants, tend to sleep in short segments as well. In the early 1950s, REM (Rapid Eye Movement) was discovered, which provided insight into sleep cycles and dreaming.

Several primary and secondary insomnia variations were found during the latter half of the 20th century. Different medical problems cause secondary sleep disorders. According to Stuart F. Quan, a professor of sleep medicine from the Sleep Division at Harvard University, medical conditions linked to insomnia include diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases.

There are a variety of sleep aids available that can either be obtained through over the counter like melatonin, and only prescribed like benzodiazepines.

Melatonin is a well-known over-the-counter sleep aid that may help insomniacs fall asleep. Unfortunately, it is more effective for short-term use than long-term use, like prescription medications. According to an article called Melatonin for the Best Practice Advocacy Center Dr. Bartle, a sleep physician, Melatonin is an antihistamine, a drug usually used to treat colds or allergies. And with these drugs being used long-term, there's always a tolerance and dependency problem.

Martin-Harris has experimented with a variety of sleep aids, with little to no success.

“Honestly, I’ve tried a lot of different things,” says Martin-Harris,. “Melatonin was good for a while, but I’ve built up a tolerance to it, so it doesn’t affect me now, and even when I did take it, I could still feel my brain spinning. I’ve also tried sleeping in a colder room and working out around bedtime to tire myself out.”

Prescription medicines such as benzodiazepines, zolpidem, and antidepressants like trazodone are available for treating insomnia. All these help insomniacs fall asleep faster and stay asleep all night by altering their neurochemistry, according to Pharmacological Treatment of Insomnia an article for the National Library of Medicine. But like every medication, they do come with side effects like dizziness, drowsiness, cognitive impairment, and addiction. In addition, insomniacs can get dependent on medications to fall asleep.

According to Kate Romero in an article titled “Alternative remedies for insomnia: a proposed method for personalized therapeutic trials,” natural remedies also exist for insomnia, like working out before bed and herbal supplements. Chamomile and passionflower tea are used to help people fall asleep. While some people may benefit from these, there is a lack of scientific evidence supporting this. These may also cause side effects.

Physician in pediatric pulmonology at Yale-New Haven Hospital and director of the Yale Pediatric Sleep Center Craig Canapiri says, “I think it's also the idea that medications be over-the-counter medications like melatonin or prescription medications are like magic treatments for insomnia. If you have really bad sleep hygiene, medications don't help you, right? This isn't anesthesia. It doesn't guarantee a night of sleep. You still have to do the work of putting your phone away and having a consistent sleep-wake schedule, etc.”

C. Michael White, head of the department of pharmacy at The University of Connecticut, mentions in an article for The Conversation titled “Why prescription drugs can work differently for different people,” that medication continuously varies from person to person, and

what works for one person may not work for another. Other factors, like genetics, age, other health conditions, and other medications, may impact how a person's body reacts to medication. Medications are a tool to help people, so it is essential to see a doctor to see if any lifestyle changes, medications, therapy, or any underlying health issues are the ones contributing to their lack of sleep.

Sleep devices, like the Apple Watch, can help monitor sleep and sleeping apps can also help people log their sleeping hours. Many people also do meditation or work out before falling asleep.

“Consumer sleep devices are fairly accurate if you're healthy and fall asleep,” says Canapari. “If you have abnormal sleep, it's less clear how accurate they are. But I think it's a start.” Canapari also recommended a free app called CBT-i Coach, used to help treat veterans with PTSD, that has a good sleep tracker and provides some basic guidance around insomnia.

Harley tracked her sleep cycle with her fitness watch for several months. “I feel like it was somewhat useful to see how many hours I usually slept,” says Harley. “One of my watches showed what sleep stage I was in at times as well, which helped me understand just how bad my sleep was because it wasn't very restful.”

Although she switched her phone from a Samsung Android to an iPhone, she believes the Samsung Smart Watch was better than her Apple Watch for tracking sleep, because it would automatically start tracking her sleep as soon as she laid down.

ASMR is a genre on YouTube associated with relaxation, calmness, and reduced stress. People use ASMR to unwind and de-stress, which can lead to better sleep. ASMR is done through videos and audio recordings of people conducting a variety of triggers. Triggers vary from person to person, and what induces ASMR for one person may differ for another.

Martin-Harris has had experience with ASMR. He would listen to cat purring ASMR and rain sounds. He tried cat purring because he loves cats and has heard that their purring can help people calm down and relax. Unfortunately, it would take him a while to fall asleep. Around 40 minutes or an hour into a video, while it did help, it did not improve his insomnia. Although it did seem to calm him down his experience with ASMR only lasted for two weeks, and he gave up on it.

ASMR is a phenomenon identified by tingling sensations that begin on the scalp and move down to the back of the neck and upper spine. Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, more commonly known as ASMR, triggers can range from whispering, tapping, and light.

ASMR is not a substitute for prescription medicines but may help an individual feel more relaxed before bedtime.

The University of California, Los Angeles Health, observed that an estimated 20% of the population had experienced ASMR. They also found that while getting chills raises heart rate and respiration, ASMR does the opposite.

“I never got into it; I think it’s kind of weird,” says Gersan Landero, the Florida International University student. “Uh... I watch random video documentaries to fall asleep. Anything I find interesting; I’ll just watch the next day.”

Hart, the registered nurse went to seek professional help for her insomnia. “I had a mixture of issues leading up to it, mainly problems with staying asleep, waking up too early or waking up frequently throughout the night, and having extremely low energy.”

“I felt like I never could get a restful night of sleep,” says Harley. “And for a while, I slept most of the way through my days off of work or school.” Her primary care doctor recommended she do an at-home sleep study, which confirmed she had sleep apnea. “Last year, I still didn’t feel like I was sleeping well or able to stay awake enough during the day even though I was using

my CPAP for my sleep apnea, so I asked my PCP [primary care physician] for a referral to a sleep medicine institute.”

A CPAP is a machine that keeps the airways open while one is asleep. It is typically recommended by a healthcare provider for sleep-related breathing disorders like sleep apnea. A CPAP machine comes with a mask that goes over the nose and mouth, a tube that connects the mask to the machine, and a motor that blows air into the tube.

At the consultation, Harley could report her concerns, energy levels, and inconsistent sleep patterns while using a CPAP machine. The doctors decided to schedule her for an in-lab sleep study to check on her sleep apnea and assess for narcolepsy.

Sleep therapy, also known as sleep counseling, refers to a range of therapeutic approaches aimed at addressing sleep-related issues and improving sleep quality. This type of therapy is typically provided by licensed mental health professionals, sleep specialists, or healthcare providers with expertise in sleep medicine. Sleep therapy may involve various techniques that cater to an individual's needs.

“I'm really interested in the rise of wearable and consumer sleep technology,” says Canapiri. “I think the jury's still out on whether it's valuable for everyone. For example, there's a condition called orthosomnia, where people who wear sleep trackers get insomnia because they start stressing about what the sleep trackers are going to tell them.

Canapiri believes that for some people it is very helpful to measure their sleep and understand it better. He also believes that in the domain of obstructive sleep apnea, they're getting new options for treatment that were not available before. For example, a CPAP machine is not a one-size-fits-all for therapy.

A typical sleepless night for Martin Harris begins with him laying in bed for hours. Starting at midnight, he lies in the dark, closing his eyes. His brain is still racing. He thinks about his day, what he ate, and his progress on a project. He tosses to the other side and checks the time. It is only 12:30 a.m. Closing his eyes once again, he thinks about tomorrow's schedule. He opens his eyes and grabs his phone to watch YouTube videos with low audio. If he does not fall asleep with one YouTube video, he puts another on and hopes to fall asleep soon. He puts his phone under his pillow and tries to sleep with only the sound playing. His phone does not help. The time is 4 a.m. He officially gives up and decides to work on his art commission, a banner for a YouTuber.

Several years ago, Martin Harris was diagnosed with moderate depression and anxiety. Mental health professionals have recently linked the role insomnia and sleep play in cases of depression. The lack of sleep often feeds into depression and makes it harder for one to have a proper sleep schedule.

"I graduated high school and was trying to figure out what I want to do with my life," says Martin-Harris. "Being in a bad headspace makes my lack of sleep worse." Since leaving high school, he has felt his anxiety go down, and he feels like a change of environment has given him a breath of fresh air.

"I knew it wasn't for me," he says. "I majored in business and immediately knew I did not want to do this. The following year, I enrolled in an art fundamentals course however, leaving there, I felt that I could have learned more."

After high school, Martin-Harris attended Humber College but did not feel he fit in with the environment. The following year, he studied abroad in Japan.

Martin-Harris majored in business but immediately knew it was not what he wanted. He changed his focus to art and enrolled in an art fundamentals course, which piqued his curiosity about art.

Living with a homestay family in Japan, Martin-Harris attended the Kudan Institute of Japanese Language.

“Honestly, in Japan, I was sleeping better,” he recalls. “I don’t know why, maybe I was in a better headspace and was overall happier. I remember hearing the crows outside my room, it was so nice.”

Most young adults tend to be more active at night, contributing to poor sleep quality, lower self-control, more procrastination, and leaving their sleep as something to ignore, according to Cassandra Burns in the article “Study Finds Bedtime Procrastination Impacts Sleep Quality,” for The Sleep Foundation.

“A lot of people just think that young adults can just go to bed earlier and get enough sleep. It doesn't really work that way,” says Canapari.

Landero finds himself endlessly scrolling on social media with no goal in sight.

“I like to stay up and play video games instead of doing my work,” says Landero. “I think my friends are also in the same boat. They probably procrastinate until the last minute as well because I don’t stay up all night alone.”

There could be many circumstances where college students do not have a regular sleep schedule. This may be easier for working adults since they have a set plan and can afford to separate their bedroom from work.

Sleep disorders put students at a disadvantage. Having an irregular sleep schedule leads to students having anxiety disorders, lower grades, and more.

“I would play music until sunrise,” says Junho Lee, a law major at Cornell University. “I play the guitar, so I like to write songs and play. Nothing would help me fall asleep, though.”

“There's nothing wrong if your first class is at noon, you sleep till 11 every day, that's fine.” says Canapari. “It works well. I think it's more when there's a lot of offsets, and people are like staying up pulling all-nighters and sleeping all day and then going to bed early. I think for people your age, whose natural tendency is to be night owls. Not true of everybody, but for a lot of people with insomnia are. When you wake up in the morning, getting light exposure and a little bit of exercise can help entrain your body clock like a trick you pull your body clock—push your body clock a little bit earlier.”

Resisting the urge to scroll endlessly through social media at night is difficult, especially for a young adult.

It is effortless to become addicted to the internet. University students often have troubles in their everyday lives, and they use the internet as an escape from the real world. Smartphones let one see how many hours a day one spends on them, down to the website, app, or even setting. High screen time may affect academic performance.

“I think that really having good device hygiene helps,” says Canapari. “The light effects of smartphones are a little bit overstated. I think what's more bothersome is the fact that there's time displacement. The fact that devices are really engaging, like all the social media apps, only make money if you're looking at them. So, they're designed to be addictive. I think ideally, turning off your phone or putting it in another room.”

Martin-Harris has tried leaving his phone on his desk, but it did not help. “Once I decided, like,” he says, “yeah, I'm not sleeping. I'm getting up to draw, and I'll get on my phone again, too.”

According to the National Sleep Foundation, spending hours on phones, computers, and tablets can lead to poor focus and low productivity. A phone call, text, or a random notification

often interrupts sleep. Excessive use of these devices can cut rest in half by doom scrolling. Screen time is integral now for university students, but finding a healthy balance is pivotal for the well-being of the body and mind.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine found that 93% of Gen Z admitted to staying up late due to social media. They state that this problem is not just a problem for young people; 80% of the population also admits to losing sleep over apps like TikTok.

Another factor that has ruined sleep cycles for many is caffeine. Who doesn't love a cup of coffee in the morning?

"In college, I would legit make like five to six cups of coffee every day and drink it throughout the day," says Martin-Harris. "But since then, I settled down because heart problems run in my family, and I am trying to be healthier. I think now I'm less addicted unless I have a deadline. I have maybe one or two cups. Honestly, saying all this... I don't know how I'm alive."

According to Steven E. Meredith, Laura M. Juliano, John R. Hughes, and Roland R. Griffiths, in an academic journal titled "Caffeine Use Disorder: A Comprehensive Review and Research Agenda," caffeine is the most used drug in the world. Even if low consumption is generally safe, once someone becomes dependent on it and cannot reduce the amount, health problems are associated, including cardiovascular issues.

"I recently started drinking Celsius, which is actually my first energy drink," says Landero. "I realized that if I drink too much, my body starts to tremble, but it gives me a really good boost in energy after sleeping for four hours. After a while, my lips start to tremble, and my anxiety is amplified."

Recently, the energy drink hype has been all about Celsius. It is easy to find in stores and even on social media. Tanea Surles, a journalist, found that Celsius has more ingredients and caffeine than Red Bull. However, the vitamin and micronutrient load and ingredients like green tea leaf extract and ginger extract make it a better choice. A Celsius has two and a half times the

amount of caffeine as Red Bull. So, people prefer it to ordinary energy drinks. But it is still an energy drink and should be taken moderately.

“I think that people have to be mindful about caffeine. Some people take up to 14 hours to metabolize caffeine. I'm one of those people,” says Canapiri. “I had a coffee one night in college at dinnertime. I was up the whole night, and I did not have any caffeine till my third year of medical school because it was such a bad experience. And now I love caffeine, but I never have it after the afternoon.”

For people dealing with insomnia, experts recommend they create a new cycle by setting a specific time to go to bed every day and trying to wake up at the same time every day. It's easier said than done. But not everything is linear; things take time. It is okay to break the cycle.

“I'd also say for people who are anxious or they're like laying in bed worrying about stuff, it's a good idea just to keep a little notebook by your bed,” says Canapiri. “And I gotta tell you, this is incredibly helpful. And if you're lying in bed worrying about something, just put a notebook by your bed, turn on your light, write it down, and then you're not going to forget tomorrow, so you don't have to worry about it. You have to lie in bed worrying like, ‘oh, I have to my thing is due tomorrow. I have to do this.’ Just look at the notebook the next day.”

Martin-Harris describes insomnia to be an annoyance. “Sometimes I really want to sleep and be normal,” he says. “Like sleeping and waking up at a set time and going about a normal day. Insomnia also affects my eating habits like a lot. Since I wake up at odd times it is hard to plan out what to eat and it feels like chaos... which I think also goes in hand with how I feel and sleep.”

Insomnia affects many people, but it is a journey that can be conquered. Seeking professional help does not mean you are lost; it is a scary step to take to have healthy sleep

hygiene. Incorporating healthy sleep habits, trying to relax before bed, and addressing the problems in your life can help one overcome insomnia.

“I honestly feel like a different person.” Says Harley. “I struggled with sleeping probably 15-18 hours a day for years, to the point my now fiancé kept telling me I was going to sleep my 20’s away. I thought it was just my depression as all the doctors kept saying. Being able to get actual somewhat restful sleep now, it’s going to sound corny, but it’s been life changing.”

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Interview Log

Graeme Martin-Harris

Title: Freelance Artist

Date: May 29, 2023

Type of Interview: In person

Subject: How insomnia affects him

Gersan Landero

Title: Student at Florida International University

Date: June 12, 2023

Type of Interview: Zoom

Subject: Experience with Insomnia

Harley Hart

Title: Registered Nurse

Date: March 12, 2024

Type of Interview: Phone

Subject: Experience at a Sleep Clinic

Deanna Marrero

Title: Student at SUNY Purchase

Date: June 1, 2023

Type of Interview: In person

Subject: Experience with Insomnia

Astrid Crespo

Title: Student at Pratt Institute

Date: September 3, 2023

Type of Interview: In person

Subject: Struggle with insomnia

Junho Lee

Title: Student at Cornell University

Date: September 4, 2023

Type of Interview: In person

Subject: How he deals with insomnia

Craig Canapiri

Title: Director of the Yale Pediatric Sleep Center and attending physician in Pediatric Pulmonology at Yale New Haven Hospital

Date: April 3, 2024

Subject: His expertise in sleep medicine, and insomnia